

## Commentary

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### Just an Old Coffee Bucket

In the autumn of 1969 I joined the faculty of the Department of Zoology at the University of Illinois, 16 years after obtaining my undergraduate degree from the same department. As an added responsibility, I was designated faculty coordinator for the Vivarium Building, where my office was located. Beginning in 1915, this building had been the academic home of Victor E. Shelford, and from 1936 that of S. Charles Kendeigh, two individuals most responsible for the emergence of ecology as a scientific discipline in North America.

One of my first tasks was to clear out a large 36 × 40 foot attic room so that it could be used as research space. The room was filled from floor to ceiling with a myriad of old field and laboratory teaching devices, worn-out camping equipment, brittle boots and waders, rotten seines, battered bird, mammal, fish, and turtle traps, broken bird nest boxes, elaborate experimental chambers and cages, obsolete recording instruments, and innumerable other unfathomable devices that had been used by Doctors Shelford and Kendeigh, and their doctoral and masters' students, many dating back to the 1920s. Seven large, truck-sized load luggers were required to haul away the accumulated history.

I felt a sad sense of nostalgia as I tossed away items that had played a pivotal role in defining the basic principles upon which the modern foundations of ecology are based. Near the end of the clearing process, I came upon a blackened, dented one-gallon bucket with a bent wire handle. I recognized this from one of our field trips to the Indiana Dunes, when an undergraduate, as the bucket used to make coffee on overnight camping field trips. At that time, we were told that this was the bucket that first Dr. Shelford and then Dr. Kendeigh had used on their camping ecology field trips from the 1920s into the 1940s.

Being somewhat of a misty-eyed nostalgic, especially in respect to inanimate objects that have been a part of history, I could not bring myself to toss the old coffee bucket in the load lugger to be taken to the dump. Too many generations of ecologists had sat around the bucket drinking coffee as they shared field experiences and discussed the "discovery" of new ecological concepts. The bucket had witnessed the training of early ecologists who later established programs in ecology at other universities: Samuel Eddy, Eugene Odum, Frank Pitelka, Robert Whittaker, and dozens upon dozens of other graduate and undergraduate students who went on to introduce ecology to students at smaller colleges and high schools. This old blackened bucket had been a silent spectator to the very beginning of ecological awareness in this country. I, therefore, took the bucket to my office, and placed it on a bookshelf.

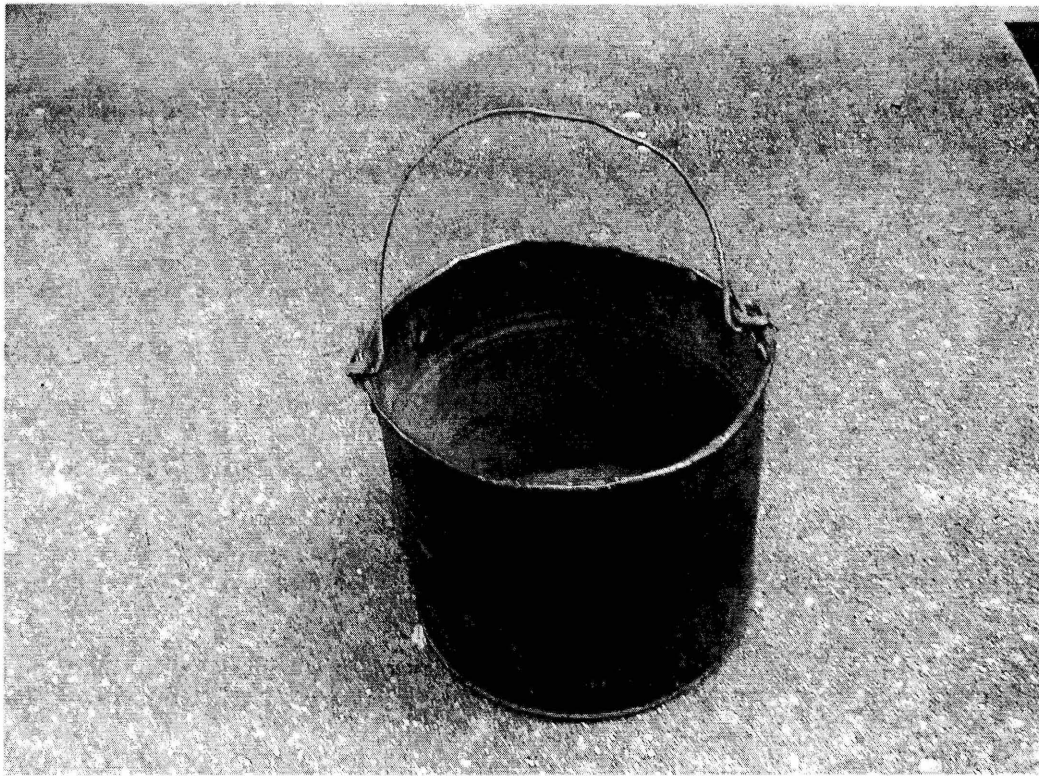


Fig 1. The old bucket in which Drs. Shelford and Kendeigh made coffee on overnight ecology field trips from the 1920s through the 1940s.

A few years later, on the occasion of the retirement of Dr. Kendeigh, several of his former students came back for a day-long seminar series. Many of Dr. Kendeigh's students had been at Illinois while Dr. Shelford was still actively teaching and conducting field trips. Upon seeing the old coffee bucket in my office, there were numerous "Oohs" and "Aahs" from the returning students. They explained how Dr. Shelford would dip up a large tin cup of coffee grounds and carefully pour out a measured number of hands-full and put them in bucket. Then, he would look at the remaining coffee grounds in the cup, back at the coffee bucket, back at the coffee grounds and simply dump the entire amount left into the bucket, sucking air through his teeth as he was wont to do when making a defining statement. They also told of the continuing arguments among the students: "Which resulted in the best tasting coffee, add the coffee grounds to the cold water and bring the water to a boil, or bring the water to a boil and add the coffee grounds?" So, the old coffee bucket remained resting on my shelf.

The years moved along and soon it was my turn to retire and downsize my office space. I gave away or tossed in a load lugger much of the accumulated items that would not fit in the smaller office space. Again, I could not bring myself to relegate the old coffee bucket to the dump and moved it to my new, small office.

More years passed and it became obvious that very soon someone else would clear the residual material in my office. My journals were shipped off to China. All books of any value were placed out for the taking and personal memorabilia moved home. And, there sat the old coffee bucket. I still could not bring myself to toss it in the load lugger. Yet, if I left it in the office, whoever cleared the office would not understand the significance of this old blackened bucket and it would end up in a landfill. This was not a proper passing for such a storied object.

After some consideration, I felt the most fitting final resting place for the old coffee bucket was Trelease Woods, the University of Illinois research area where Drs. Shelford and Kendeigh and their graduate students had conducted much of the pioneering research upon which the discipline of ecology is based. Accordingly, on a bright sunny afternoon in late October, I took the old coffee bucket into the middle of Trelease Woods. I carefully scraped away the leaf litter and with a trowel, dug out a plug of soil the size of the bucket, gently pushed the bucket into the hole, and replaced the soil plug inside the bucket. I then brushed the leaf litter over the site, leaving it as it had been, as we had been taught to do on our early ecology field trips.

As I slowly walked away, I turned back for a final, parting look. When I did, I sensed the wispy forms of Dr. Shelford and long-ago ecology students hunched down around the old, blackened coffee bucket. They were drinking coffee and still debating the unresolved question: "Which resulted in the best tasting coffee, add the coffee grounds to the cold water and bring the water to a boil, or bring the water to a boil and add the coffee grounds?" Just an old coffee bucket, an inanimate object so intimately associated with the early foundations of ecology, forever resting where it all began.

Lowell L. Getz  
Professor Emeritus  
Ecology, Ethology, and Evolution  
University of Illinois  
Urbana, IL 61801